



EDITOR'S PAGE



When Is Bigger Too Big?

WILLIAM W. PARMLEY, MD, FACC

Editor-in-Chief

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This editorial was prompted by the comments of many colleagues at the recent national meetings of the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology. The phrases I heard were, "This meeting is too big." "I can't get into the room to hear key presentations." "I can't get from one place to another in time to hear papers presented." "I can't get to the abstract talks because there are so many committee meetings." "My hotel is so far away, it takes more than an hour just to get to the meeting." "I tried to get to your presentation, but I kept running into old friends on the way over." "I can't reach Dr. X because he's never in his hotel and doesn't pick up his messages at the message center." "With all the pre-meeting meetings, I'm exhausted before the regular meeting begins." "This meeting is déjà vu all over again."

These and similar phrases probably strike a familiar chord. For type A attendees like ourselves, there can be many frustrations at these meetings, particularly as they get bigger and more complex. The very strength of the meetings, namely the broad and detailed review of all aspects of heart disease that they offer, has made for difficult choices because it is possible to sample only a small number of the presentations. Nevertheless, I have a few thoughts on how to survive a national meeting and still enjoy it.

1. Relax. You don't have to listen to every abstract on the program! Usually being at the meeting gets you away from most phone calls and most (but not all) faxes. Adopt a measured pace of social and educational activities that is far below the frenetic schedule your compulsive nature may unconsciously outline for you.

2. Plan. Careful planning before the meeting is essential to hearing those presentations of greatest interest. Note times and locations so that you have ample opportunity to move between sessions. Often a good symposium is more enlightening than a series of abstracts on the same topic.

3. Attend exhibits and poster sessions. I find that the poster sessions are an efficient and rewarding way to review accepted abstracts. One can pick and choose which ones to examine in detail, particularly if the presenter is there to respond to questions. Because the poster sessions are generally located near the exhibits, taking a different path to the poster sessions each time will help you to see most of the exhibits, particularly those on Publishers Row, which are always a favorite of mine.

4. Plan committee meetings carefully. Make certain that committee meetings are not scheduled during regular meeting times and are as convenient as possible to the convention facilities. If you must leave early or arrive late, let the Chairman know right away, so that important business related to you can be handled when you will be present.

5. Leave time for social activities. To my mind, one of the greatest benefits of our national cardiology meetings is the opportunity to meet with colleagues, friends and international attendees in a collegial atmosphere. Don't be so overprogrammed at the meeting that you don't have time to exchange greetings and ideas. Some of the most interesting science may be discussed over dinner rather than in a plenary session. An appropriate social schedule can help you enjoy a national meeting, rather than just endure it.

Although following these suggestions will not necessarily reduce the problems associated with ever larger national and international meetings, they may increase your sense of fulfillment. Appropriate expectations and a positive mindset are the key to individual satisfaction.

One basic question is whether these meetings are, in fact, so big that efforts should be made to reduce their size. Large meetings have several benefits. They can cover all aspects of heart disease in a comprehensive and current way. They also help to financially support the sponsoring organizations. The availability of so many people in one place at one time facilitates committee meetings, organizational business, job interviews, scientific interchange, and so forth. In some cases, however, smaller more focused meetings may have greater appeal to some individuals, as for example the North

Address for correspondence: William W. Parmley, MD, Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, 415 Judah Street, San Francisco, California 94122.

American Society of Pacing and Electrophysiology (NASPE) meeting for electrophysiologists. Certainly a wide variety of smaller meetings are available. My guess is that so long as the current financial incentives are in place, the national meetings will remain as large as possible. However,

with more limited financial resources in the future, it may well be that these meetings will spontaneously downsize or at least fail to grow much further. In the meantime, each of us must follow an individual strategy for achieving our goals at these meetings while minimizing the hassle.